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Chapter 23

Connecting Children with God through Nature

Why We Should and how we Can

———— BEVERLY J. CHRISTIAN ————

SPIRITUALITY IS A FRAGILE yet strong component of human life, especially in children. Writers focusing on children's spirituality acknowledge that despite multiple ways in which God is viewed, an overarching belief in a personal relationship with something or someone outside of themselves is widely acknowledged by children (Allen & Ross 2012; Barrett 2012; Louv 2008). From a Christian perspective, spirituality involves the development of a mindful relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and an ongoing response to that relationship within the context of a community of believers. In order to flourish spiritually, children need reference points that direct them toward God and help them build a relationship with Him. This chapter explores how the natural world can offer a reference point that supports the Bible and the faith communities espousing the Bible in nurturing children's spirituality, and how this may be facilitated by parents and teachers in a home, church or school context.

Goodwin (2009) makes the observation that the early chapters of Genesis establish a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural world. The issue of why nature needs humanity is worthy of its own discussion (Ray 2006), but is not the topic of conversation for this chapter. While Christianity often takes a stewardship approach to the natural world, this chapter focuses on the less-explored experiential approach and the issue of why nature is important to faith formation in children.

The World in Which Today's Children Live

The twenty-first century is characterized by rapid change, and this has become obvious both in how we live and where we live. Patterns of human behavior are changing and children are falling victim to overstimulation and hurry sickness in a fast-paced society (Fishbaugh 2011; Louv 2012). They are transported from event to event, and sometimes parent to parent, after school and on weekends in an attempt to juggle family life, work, hobbies, and sport. Many childhood activities are highly structured and controlled by adults. Few children enjoy the extended hours of free play in the outside natural world that their parents and grandparents experienced while growing up (Louv 2008). Instead, technological devices are contributing to a disconnect with nature (Bauer 2009; Burdette & Whitaker 2005; Louv 2012; Wilson 2012). Even when today's children are allowed the freedom to choose their play mode, more often than not they reach for a technological device that keeps them indoors. If the "screenagers" (Rushkoff 2008) of today experience the natural world at all, it is increasingly through virtual reality, applications for which are growing at an escalating rate (Louv 2012). Add to this the changing patterns of place, which include the spreading built environment and the concomitant shrinking natural environment, and it becomes apparent that even if many children chose to go outside, they would struggle to find the canyons and streams, forests and fields that featured in their parents' childhood activities. Urbanization is continually on the rise as the world's inhabitants increasingly abandon the wide open spaces in search of employment and financial security. As Knight (2013) notes, "before the urbanization of the nineteenth century it was not necessary to create formal links between education and the outdoor environment" (2), but that is not the case in the twenty-first century.

This world of virtual nature experiences (Burdette & Whitaker 2005; Louv 2012), overstimulation (Fishbaugh 2011), and the shrinking of children's play spaces to the family home or apartment in urban areas (Louv 2008), is increasingly limiting the time children spend in nature (Bauer 2009). This is resulting in what Louv (2008) calls "Nature-Deficit Disorder" (11). In response to these changes, a rising number of educators, social commentators and environmentalists are calling for nature to again become an important part of every child's life (Erickson & Ernst 2011; Louv 2008; Wilson 2012).

Reconnecting Children with Nature —A Global Perspective

The global movement to reconnect children with nature is largely motivated by a desire to foster the wellbeing of children. Historically, there have always been champions of the child/nature connection. Reggio Emilia pre-schools, the Steiner approach to education and the philosophies of Pestalozzi and Froebel all emphasize the importance of play in the outdoors. Others promoting the nature/child connection include Hahn's Outward Bound model, Baden-Powell's scouting clubs and a variety of church and community organizations that spawned the summer camp movement (Paris 2008). Today, an increasing number of organizations promote sustained and regular time outside in nature. Though varying in their philosophical, physiological and psychological approach to the benefits of nature, these organizations have a common goal; to enhance the wellbeing of the whole child.

One organization focused on well-being is the Forest School movement, based on a Scandinavian model and growing rapidly in the United Kingdom and further afield. This program is described as "an inspirational process that offers all learners regular opportunity to achieve, as well as to develop confidence and self-esteem, through hands-on learning experiences in a local woodland or natural environment with trees" (Knight 2013, 16). The aims of Forest schools include support for the child/nature nexus, holistic development, the fostering of resilience, independence, confidence, creativity and community building (Warden 2015). Also listed as a goal is the development of "spiritual aspects of the learner" (Knight 2013, 17). Many mainstream schools are also recognizing the benefits of intentional outdoor connections, and are experimenting with custom-designed play grounds where children can interact with nature (Alaniz 2015).

The idea of connecting children to nature is not limited to formal education. When Louv (2008) published his national bestseller, "Last Child in the Woods", he was elaborating on a renewed interest in connecting children with the natural world (Kellert 2005; Kessler 2000; Warden 2007; Young & Elliot 2003). An increasing number of authors are promoting the benefits of connecting children of all ages to nature; citing health benefits, the development of creativity, problem-solving, self-esteem, communication skills, empathy, social-emotional and cognitive development as some of the positive outcomes of spending time outdoors (Burdette & Whitaker 2005; Erickson & Ernst 2011; Kessler 2000; Louv 2008; Ward 2009; Warden 2007; Wilson 2012). These benefits alone are enough for Christian parents, teachers and pastors to justify the fostering of a child/nature nexus, but there is an additional reason. The natural environment also offers opportunities for faith development and a platform for nurturing spirituality.

Many authors and organizations promoting nature education for children acknowledge a heightened sense of spirituality. Although they use the term spirituality in the broadest sense of the definition, such as Kessler's something "larger and more meaningful than day-to-day existence" (2000, 29), or Wilson's "sense of transcendence" (69), none however, focus on developing an encounter with God as creator, and most disassociate the spiritual from any form of organized religion, preferring instead to defer to values and moral development (Kellert 2005). There is mounting evidence, however, to support a connection between nature and spirituality. Barrett (2012) offers evidence that children begin life with sense-making brains. He posits that they see purpose and function in nature and automatically search for the designer. Such a notion is consistent with Louv's (2012) suggestion that the ability to sense a higher power is accelerated when all senses are fully engaged, as when immersed in nature.

A Christian worldview, however, moves beyond a vague sense of spirituality. Instead, it positions God as creator and sustainer of the natural world, humanity included (Ps 8:3–4; Ps 139:13–14; Rev 4:11). The implications of this stance determine the relationship between individuals and the natural world; and therefore offer a framework for extending the innate beliefs that young children hold of God.

A Christian Perspective on Connecting with Nature

Although the literature is generous in its acknowledgement of the benefits derived from connecting children with the natural world (Burdette & Whitaker 2005; Erickson & Ernst 2011; Louv 2008; Warden 2007; Young & Elliot 2003), there is less evidence that Christian educators are fully recognizing the value of nature experiences in connecting children with God. While society, schools, churches, and families may share some common goals when fostering nature awareness in children, Christian educators can add a further reference point. The natural world adds another dimension to build on children's natural propensities toward God; that of exploring their innate sense of God, and more importantly, experiencing the presence of God. Therefore, nature may play an important role in the developing spirituality and faith of children. Referred to by some as God's second book (Bailey 2009; Goodwin 2009, White 2000), but in reality God's original book, the natural world confirms the supremacy of God as creator and illuminates the character of God (Christian 2017).

Those who have explored spiritual growth through nature acknowledge several components of faith formation. Among these are understanding,

experiencing and sharing, that is, understanding of the Holy Scriptures, experiencing God in everyday life and sharing with community one's own experience of God (Foster 2012; Jonker 2015). Learning in the natural world has the potential to enhance all three areas of faith formation. Children learn about God's law of selfless love as they explore the wonders of the natural environment. Children experience God through their senses when immersed in nature. Children, in solitude, celebrate their delight and awe of God's creation, and then share it with their parents, peers and teachers. God can be experienced in a variety of ways, including Bible reading, family rituals, and belonging to a faith community that intentionally creates an environment where children enjoy the presence of God (Allen & Ross 2012; de Roos 2006; Fischer 2014; Moriarty 2011; Mountain 2011; Thompson 2010). The wonder and majesty of nature also has potential to create spiritual reference points that help children connect the dots in their relationship with God (Christian 2010; National Institute of Christian Education 2015; Stankard 2003). Despite this support for nature experiences, children still do most of their learning about God within four walls.

Experiencing the God of Creation

Does it matter if Christian parents and educators teach about God without stepping outside? I believe it does. The natural world provides a reference point for children to learn about who God is and how God acts. The Bible itself claims that "ever since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made" (Rom 1:20 NASB). Jennings (2013) puts it this way, "God's nature of love is seen in creation because all nature, all life is built, designed, constructed to operate on the template of God's love" (24). Many attributes of God's character are revealed through the natural world. Graham (2009) reasons that "the intricacy and diversity of creation could only have been developed with an infinite mind, capable of making every diverse dimension of the creation fit and work with every other dimension" (51). That God values diversity is apparent with a simple nature walk or visit to a zoo. But it is not only diversity that testifies to a creator. The building materials of nature, such as spider silks and abalone shells, have properties that surpass equivalent man-made materials, supporting a case for intelligent design (Dovich 2009). That God is a master of order is also evident in nature. From the Fibonacci pattern of a pine cone to the fractal spirals of the nautilus shell, design and order are visible everywhere. Paralleling that order is beauty. The intricate loveliness of a lyrebird's plumage, the iridescent scales of coral reef fish and the delicate pattern of a snowflake all speak of a God who values beauty. Yet, although nature reveals

much about God, much also remains a mystery. This engenders a sense of awe. The secrets of bird migration patterns or the caribou as they begin their annual trek across the tundra are examples of these mysteries of nature and are a testament to the God who is above and beyond humanity.

Yet there is an anomaly in nature. Not everything is perfect, and amazing opportunities to explore God's redemptive acts may be lost if parents and teachers ignore the ugly and destructive side of nature. Nature offers evidence of a breach in humanity's face-to-face communion with God. While we cannot be certain how the natural world changed after the fall of humanity, we can observe object lessons in nature that point to both the long-term effects of sin, and the endurance of selfless love, through which the healing of the breach can occur (Jennings 2013). As such, the natural world supports the belief that undergirds the epic story of salvation, and therefore an experience in nature may enhance a child's understanding of salvation, for it is in nature that the dichotomy of decay with regeneration, death with life, and taking with giving becomes evident. This may occur without adult intervention, or through guided discussions with adults who honor a biblical worldview. The selfless, amazing, inspiring and awesome become visible. This experience, this sense of transcendence, focuses on a creator God who also recreates through everlasting love.

Nature provides ample opportunities for children to catch glimpses of God's everlasting love for His children. "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and evidence of this love is found in the natural world. Natural laws testify to the selfless love of God and all nature is a living object lesson of a selfless love that restores and renews. The caterpillar gives up its life in order to emerge as a resplendent butterfly, the pine cone gives up its seeds to regenerate the forest. The log, rotting on the forest floor, enriches the soil so new life can flourish, and the imperfection planted in an oyster is transformed by giving in to a perfect pearl. These examples demonstrate that God's eternal law of unselfish love runs deep in the natural laws that govern life. The law of selfless love also provides evidence that God sustains. The turning seasons offer an example that the cycle of life is sustained. The cycle that keeps water in motion is a prime example of the law of giving. Water stagnates if withdrawn from this cycle. If the cycle is interrupted, life is impacted. Both selfishness and its antithesis, selflessness, can be observed in the natural world.

With so many opportunities to learn about the character and actions of God, and to experience the presence of God without distraction, the natural environment can offer a truly sensory and spiritual experience for children. Immersion in the natural world arouses all the senses and creates an atmosphere of responsiveness to God. Connecting children with nature may be an important way of helping them encounter God in a world where the sounds of humanity may otherwise drown out the creator's voice.

Re-Establishing the Connection

Three ways in which Christian educators can facilitate a connection with God through nature are the use of intentional nature experiences, free-play immersion in natural environments and serendipitous moments.

Intentional Nature Experiences

Intentional nature experiences fall into two categories: taking children to nature, and bringing nature to children. An intentional nature experience involves a purpose and an outcome, and guides children toward a new understanding. An important part of the guiding process involves intentional questioning. For teaching examples, see Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of Intentional Outdoor Nature Activities

Goal	Purpose	Activity
To recognize that all people are God’s children, loved by Him.	Makes connections between diversity in leaves and diversity in people.	Children collect a variety of leaves. Examine them with magnifying glasses. Sort them and create categories. Question children about their diversity. What does this tell them about God? Make a comparison to people. Ask what this tells them about God. Ask children to look around for other examples of diversity.
	Discovers examples of diversity in nature.	
To teach the concept of selfless giving.	Articulates that selfless giving involves giving up something so that something else may flourish.	Examine a rotting log. Feel the breakdown of the wood. Search for evidence that new life is growing from the log. Question children about what the tree has to give up in order for fungi and new plants to sprout and grow. Ask what this tells them about God. (Guide through questioning to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.) Ask children to look around for other examples where death enables new life.
	Links selfless giving in nature to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.	

Although the ideal is to take children out into nature frequently, this is not always possible. Children can still connect with nature in their homes, churches or classrooms when nature is brought to the children (Wilson 2012). Those responsible for teaching children and teens in church settings can bring nature objects into their Bible lessons that encourage the children to reflect on God's character and ways. Table 2 provides suggestions for bringing nature into the classroom.

Table 2. Examples of Intentional Inside Nature Activities

Purpose	Outcomes	Guided Activity
To explore design in relation to purpose and a designer	Reflects on the design of a feather	Provide a variety of feathers, some soft and downy, some wing feathers that interlock. Use magnifying glasses, explore the shafts and how they appear. Question children about differences and similarities and the purpose of the feathers.
To explore the concept of a new life after conversion	Reflects on a metaphor of conversion: a tree shedding bark	Find a photograph of a tree that is shedding its bark. Bring some of the bark into the classroom. Compare the color and texture of the shed bark to the new bark. Ask, "How is conversion like a tree shedding bark?"

Gardens, whether in pots or plots, also provide an ongoing source of nature experiences, and encourage children to nurture and value growing plants. Gardens also provide opportunities to observe and to hold extended conversations over time about life cycles and growth (Warden 2015). This can be done within a Christian context. Once children become aware of how nature demonstrates the character and actions of God, they will be able to find their own examples and share them.

A popular way to bring nature into the classroom is through technology. Carefully selected nature documentaries and virtual field studies may be useful tools. They can teach children about the natural world and God's creative power, but they are limited when it comes to children encountering God. Since children learn and experience life through their senses and technology restricts sensory input (Aitken et al. 2012), relying on technology

alone is not adequate in connecting children with nature and, therefore, with God. The sight and sound of a cascading waterfall in nature is enhanced by the smell of wet leaves and fine spray on one's face, something not experienced on a screen. The silence of the natural world that allows thought processing is not available with the ongoing commentary that accompanies a nature documentary. Therefore, virtual nature experiences should be supplemented where possible with real nature experiences.

Free-Play Immersion

Not all nature experiences need to be intentional. Some of the best moments occur when children are allowed to immerse themselves in the natural environment with no agenda (Wilson 2012). It is claimed that play is essential to both learning (Robinson & Aronica 2015) and spirituality (Mountain 2011). Play in natural environments increases learning potential. Just merely being in the natural environment is therapeutic, and some also advocate for times of silence in nature, times to listen to the gentle chirping of crickets, the rustling of branches, or the intensity of a thunderclap or waterfall. McDaniel (2006) calls this "deep listening" (30) and purports that "when there is no listening, God is absent" (29). Langdoc (2013) also supports the value of quiet times to enhance children's experiences with God. If quiet, reflective times are combined with a peaceful, outdoor setting, the encounter with God will be even more powerful. Sitting on a sand dune listening to the waves crash on the beach is a spiritual experience in itself that needs no explanation. Lying on a mattress of pine needles and watching the forest giants sway overhead in the wind develops a sense of God's majesty that may surpass a sermon. Watching leaves in their autumnal glory flutter earthwards in the morning sunlight may connect a child to God in ways not possible in a more conventional setting.

Serendipitous Moments

Finally, there are serendipitous moments where children connect to God in a profound way. Serendipitous moments may occur inside or outside, during intentional nature experiences or during unstructured exploration or play. These moments cannot be planned, and intuitive Christian teachers and parents will recognize the moment when a child makes a spiritual discovery, and celebrate with the child. The adult's role in this process may involve a joint voyage of discovery with a child, or it may involve remaining silent until asked to join the conversation.

God-Encounter Conversations

The investigative approach adopted to teach children scientific ways of looking at the world can be adapted to help a child develop their understanding of God. The role of the adult in conversations about God will vary depending on the type of nature experience. Warden sees the adult role in nature experiences as ranging from explicit teaching to “the calm supportive structure of an almost silent presence” (2015, xiii). Aitken et al. highlight the importance of “honoring a child’s sense of wonder” (2012, 22) and encourage teachers to adopt “an attitude of excited discovery” (25). This occurs when adults cultivate their own sense of wonder and join their students in their awe of God’s created world. This results in a God-encounter conversation. God-encounter conversations take place during an experience with the natural world. They involve an adult and child coming together in a sense of awe and wonder. Sometimes this awe may have to be nurtured; other times the adult simply joins the child in their attitude of excitement and wonder. The child is encouraged to observe, marvel, and share observations while the adult engages, facilitates, and questions where appropriate. Intentional questions to ask may include the following: *What are our senses telling us? What does this tell us about God? What can we learn from this? What more do we want to learn?* These questions are important in gently directing the child’s mind toward God.

As children explore the colors, textures, sights and sounds of God’s creation, the teacher who is attuned to their wonderment will recognize when the time is right to instigate a conversation with God. Simple questions giving children the option to tell God about what they have just discovered will guide the young learner into prayers of thanksgiving and praise. These may take the form of songs, dances, monologues or artworks along with the more traditional forms of prayer. Time to reflect and write may also provide opportunities for older children to converse with the creator God and help develop a meaningful relationship with Him.

Conclusion

In addition to the cognitive, social-emotional and physical benefits touted by the global back-to-nature movement, the natural world provides opportunity for spiritual development. More specifically, it provides opportunities for children to experience God through a multi-sensory approach. Children immersed in the natural world may find a reference point through which they can further develop their understanding of God’s creative and

sustaining power, character of love, and the law of love on which the universe operates. The natural world can open children's eyes to the consequences of sin and the wonders of salvation. It can also open their hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit. In an often confusing and complicated world, the natural environment offers another set of coordinates to guide children's incipient spirituality and faith development.

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